

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9688

INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

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C O N F I D E N T I A L CAIRO 1289

E.O. 11652: GDS

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SUBJECT: INFLUENCE OF LEBANESE CONFLICT ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM
RELATIONSHIP IN EGYPT

1. SUMMARY: SHARPLY ETCHED CONFESSIONAL ASPECTS
OF LEBANESE CONFLICT ARE HAVING MILD PSYCHOLOGICAL
SPILL-OVER EFFECT IN EGYPT. SIX MILLION STRONG
COPTIC COMMUNITY, POLITICALLY WEAK AND MILITARILY
HELPLESS, ARE EXHIBITING SOME NERVOUSNESS OVER
POSSIBILITY THAT MUSLIM FUNDAMENTALISTS MIGHT BE
ENCOURAGED BY LEBANESE EVENTS TO REVIVE OLD ANTI-
CHRISTIAN ANTAGONISMS. GOE IS ALERT TO SOOTHE
COPTIC NERVES AND SITUATION SEEMS WELL IN HAND. END SUMMARY.

2. ON SURFACE AT LEAST, MUSLIM-COPTIC RELATIONS ARE
GOOD. SINCE 1971, CHURCH BURNINGS IN DELTA,
GOE HAS EXERTED ITSELF TO PREVENT ANY RECURRENCE.
THUS, FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN STRAINS OF OCTOBER WAR LED
TO WIDESPREAD RUMORS THAT COPTIC TRAITOR WAS
RESPONSIBLE FOR DERVERSOIR BREAKTHROUGH, SADAT
REGISTERED HIS CONFIDENCE IN COPTIC LOYALTY BY
APPOINTING COPT AS SECOND ARMY COMMANDER. GOE
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HAS CONTINUED MAKE VISIBLE COMENSTRATIONS OF

FRATERNAL UNITY BY SUCH GESTURES AS SENDING SENIOR MUSLIM POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS FIGURES TO ANNUAL CHURCH OF APPARITION SERVICES.

3. OUTBREAK OF CONFESSIONAL STRIFE LAST YEAR IN LEBANON NATURALLY REVIVED COPTIC EDINESS. BY DECEMBER, COPTIC CONCERN ABOUT DISCRIMINATION WAS SURFACING OCCASIONALLY IN DAILY PRESS. ONE ARTICLE, FOR EXAMPLE, NOTED RECENT GOE SELECTIONS BY GOE FOR BOARD MEMBERS OF 117 COMPANIES DID NOT INCLUDE SINGLE COPTIC NAME. ANOTHER MAJOR COMPLAINT IS THAT COPTS, WHO MAKE UP 1/6 OF POPULATION, HAVE ONLY TWO MINISTERS IN A CABINET OF 34, AND NEITHER OF THE TWO REALLY REPRESENT COPTIC COMMUNITY. COPTIC PATRIARCH HAS BEEN URGING REPLACEMENT OF MINSTATE BARSUM AND ALSO WANTS MORE COPTIC JUDGES.

4. AS INTER-CONFESSIONAL FIGHTING IN LEBANON BECAME SAVAGE, COPTIC EDIGNESS GREW. RUMORS BEGAN TO CIRCULATE IN CAIRO: E.G., ALLEGED BEATING OF ALEXANDRIA PRIEST, BOMB FOUND AND DEFUSED IN ALEXANDRIA CHURCH (FAHMY CONTENTS COPTS STAGED THE WHOLE THING). RECENT PHOTO IN CAIRO PRESS OF MARONITE SOLIDER, WEARING LARGE CROSS, GUARDING KARANTINA MUSLIM PRISONERS (CAIRO 835) DID NOT HELP EITHER, AND COPTIC DEL APPROACHED PRIMIN TO URGE SUCH POTENTIALLY INCENDIARY PHOTOS NOT BE PUBLISHED AGAIN. (THEY HAVE NOT.) PARTICULARLY WORRISOME FOR MINORITIES HERE IS DRAFT BILL INTRODUCED INTO PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY PROPOSING RECASTING OF CONSTITUTION TO REFLECT ISLAMIC SHARI'A LAW, A MOVE PUBLICLY LAUDED BY SHAIKH AL-AZHAR AND IN A DEMONSTRATION BY FEW HUNDRED AZHAR STUDENTS.

5. GOE OFFICIALS DISCOUNT ANY NEED FOR COPTIC COMMUNITY TO BE EDGY, BUT ARE ALSO TAKING DISCREET STEPS TO PREVENT ANY OUTBREAK OF CONFESSIONAL STRIFE. PRIMIN TOOK UNUSAL STEP OF PAYING CHRISTMAS VISIT TO PATRIARCH JANUARY 12. THIS
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WAS PROBABLY INTENDED AS SIGNAL TO ALL EGYPTIANS OF GOE'S INTEREST IN COPTIC COMMUNITY AND TO REASSURE CHRISTIANS. (IRONICALLY, FAHMY TOLD AMBASSADOR THAT PRIMIN'S VISIT WAS MADE AT BEHEST OF SADAT WHO WANTED PASS MESSAGE TO PATRIARCH TO CEASE AGITATING FOR GREATER COPTIC ROLE IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS.)

KNOWLEDGEABLE SAUDI AMBASSADOR HAS POINTED OUT

TO US THAT REGULAR FRIDAY MUSLIM SERMONS AT PRINCIPAL MOSQUES HAVE ASSIDUOUSLY AVOIDED ANY ALLUSION TO LEBANESE CONFESSIONAL STRIFE. HE NOTES THAT IT IS AT THESE FRIDAY SERVICES THAT ORTHODOX MUSLIM REACTION TO CURRENT EVENTS IS SHAPED. HE IS CONVINCED THAT GOE, THROUGH SHAIKH AL-AZHAR HAS SENT OUT WORD TO IMAMS TO LAY OFF ANY REFERENCE TO SECTARIAN ASPECTS OF FIGHTING. ANOTHER WIDELY NOTED EXAMPLE: ON JANUARY 3, GOE ORDERED BROADCAST TIME FOR SUNDAY COPTIC SERVICE BE INCREASED FROM 30 TO 45 MINUTES.

6. LOCAL EDITORS ALSO SEEM TO BE TAKING ON SOOTHING ROLE. ARTICLES AND LETTERS APPEAR FAIRLY CONSTANTLY RECALLING THAT IT WAS MUSLIM-COPTIC UNITY WHICH, SINCE DAYS OF SA'D ZAGHLUL IN 1919, GAVE IMPETUS AND PUNCH TO INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT. A RECENT LETTER TO GUMHURIYYA SIGNED BY A MUSLIM GOE OFFICIAL SUGGESTED CHRISTMAS AND EASTER BE ADDED TO OFFICIAL CALENDAR OF NATIONAL HOLIDAYS.

7. COMMENT: IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE THAT SOME ELEMNTNS OF COPTIC COMMUNITY SHOULD BE WORRIED. YET ALL THE EVIDENCE POINTS TO GOE BEING AT PAINS TO MAKE CLEAR IN LOW KEY BUT FIRM MANNER THAT IT WILL NOT TOLERATE DIRECT OR INDIRECT RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIAN MINORITY. WE ALSO BELIEVE THAT IT HAS CAPABILITY TO PREVENT ANY SUCH PERSECUTION AND THAT ANY ACTS BY INDIVIDUAL MUSLIM ZEALOTS AGAINST CHRISTIANS WILL BE PROMPTLY AND SEVERELY DEALT WITH.

8. POSSIBILITY OF ISOLATED ACTS BY MUSLIM FANATICS
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SHOULD NOT, HOWEVER, BE DISCOUNTED, ESPECIALLY IF ELEMENTS OF FAR RIGHT SHOULD MISREAD SIGNALS FROM AZHAR. THUS, FOR EXAMPLE, EVEN AFTER SPEAKER MAR'I VISITED SHAIKH AL-AZBHAR JANUARY 25 TO POINT OUT THAT HIS PUBLIC ADVOCATION OF INSERTING SHARI'S LAW INTO CONSTITUTION HAD DISTRESSED EGYPT'S CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH MINORITIES, SHAIKH MADE SPECIAL STATEMENT TO GUMHURIYYA JANUARY 30 STRONGLY ADVOCATING HARSH PENALTIES OF MUSLIM LAW AND WARNING OF COMMUNIST/ JEWISH "SCHEMING" AGAINST ISLAM.

9. AT PRESENT, COPTIC COMMUNITY IS NOT UNDULY WORRIED. LEADING COPTS KNOW THAT GOE IS ALERT TO INCIPIENT PROBLEM. FAHMY HAS STRESSED TO AMBASSADOR THAT MINORITIEIS NEED NOT BE CONCERNED AND CITED

"STUPIDITY" OF KUWAITI ANTI-CHRISTIAN PRONOUNCEMENTS
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